

## EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SAMPLER EAC- 91-1-LL



**Description:** As the 1700s progressed, most samplers lost the long narrow look of the previous century that was reflected in the narrow width of the loom on which the fabric was woven. However this somewhat curious sampler, long and narrow, dated 1758, is definitely styled like its 1600 predecessors. The reason for this old shape is not likely due to narrow fabric woven on an old loom, but rather an embroiderer adapting her fabric to the measurements of the old pattern she was copying. Upon close inspection, the selvage edges on the top and the bottom indicate that the fabric is definitely an 18<sup>th</sup> Century width. The sampler includes six alphabets, almost all of which are in upper case, one set of numbers, numerous initials and the date is embroidered on 13 bands plus three half bands. All except one band are underlined in tent stitch worked over two stitches. Most of the sampler is stitched in cross-stitch, with one alphabet in eyelet technique. The only colours used are dark and slate-like tones of navy and deep rose wools.

Modest though this sampler may be, it does invite inquiry. Worked on evenweave linen about 35 threads to the inch, it measures 20 centimetres by 41.5 centimetres.

The first alphabet is stitched over two threads with each letter being seven cross-stitches high. As was often the case in this era, the letters J and U are missing. In addition, the letters Q, T and V are very worn and it appears that O and P may have been re-stitched at a later date, as a different fibre is used. All of the letters are worked in the two shades of navy blue and the deep rose. There does not appear to be a particular order in the use of colour. The letter A is dark navy, which is followed by five pairs of letters in

alternating rose and dark navy, ending with rose. The remaining letters include four dark navy, two rose, three slate-like navy, another dark navy, a rose and finally both Y and Z in slate-like navy.

The second alphabet is the same size as the first, seven cross-stitches high, all of which are over two threads. There is some variation in the spaces between the letters. Those in the rose colour include AB, FG, QR and WX. All the others are worked in either the dark or slate navy wools. Again, the J and U are missing; seemingly what was the letter L has but one stitch left. However, on the whole, this alphabet has endured much better than the first.

The third alphabet, half the size of the first two, is comprised of letters seven crosses high, but each stitch is only over one thread. Again, this alphabet is minus a J and U but is reasonably intact. The letters D, E, F, O, P, Q and X are worked in deep rose, G, H and V are in the slate-like navy tone and all the other letters are worked in dark navy. Although the alphabet is tiny and the stitching worn, it is still apparent that not all letters are equally spaced.

The fourth alphabet presents a new challenge to the stitcher, as it is totally embroidered in eyelet stitch. Each eyelet is worked over four threads and each letter is seven eyelets high. In other words, the letters in this alphabet are 28 fabric threads high, as opposed to seven and 14 in those rows above. Similarly, there are some noticeable discrepancies in the spacing of the letters. While the embroidery is very worn making it difficult to determine the original lettering, it would appear that either the I or the J is missing. In keeping with the thinking in the previous alphabets, it may well be the J; similarly, the U is missing. It is interesting to note that the letters B, C, D, H and I are especially worn. For instance, only the lower half of B survives. However, the last line of letters—S, T, V, W, X, Y and Z—is completely intact. Again, colour choice seems to be random. Only B, E, H, M, P, T and Z are worked in the rose wool, the remaining letters are stitched in the two navy shades with the darker tone being used the most.

The fifth alphabet is the focal point of the sampler for three reasons: it is the largest with each letter 48 fabric threads high or 24 cross stitches over two threads, it is ornately stitched; and, it begins just above the centre of the embroidery and finishes near the bottom. At least one or more rectangles all outlined in cross-stitch over two threads define the shape of the letters. For instance, the A, is worked in dark navy, and, like those above, lacks the centre bar, but has a long bar, or rectangle comprising 16 cross stitches resting across the pinnacle of the two legs. And, like the rectangles on the other letters, it is four fabric threads wide. It is filled with

groups of two cross stitches that alternate in step formation from top to bottom within the rectangle. The legs of the A are each composed of two diagonal rows of cross-stitches, neither of which are outlined. Each leg stands on two groups of four stitches, similar to those at either end of the rectangle across the top. All of the other letters appear even more complicated or ornate, in that they are fashioned in two colours. For instance, the B is designed with six rectangles, the one forming the back being the longest one. The curved top and bottom portions are each comprised of two small rectangles placed perpendicularly to each other, with another small rectangle in the centre. The rectangles are all outlined in dark navy with deep rose cross-stitch fillings. A rectangle fashions the spine of the letter K, while six groups of four cross stitches each shape the diagonal top and bottom branches or legs of the letter. The latter are all worked in rose, while the back rectangle is outlined in rose and filled with one row of cross stitches in dark navy.

Probably the greatest variation within this alphabet is the N that really catches the eye. While the A appears wide with 52 fabric threads across the bottom, including the feet, the N is 72 threads wide from the long back rectangle to the long front rectangle and its decorative feet. Both the back and front rectangles are outlined in navy cross stitch over two threads, with the centres filled with alternating pairs of rose cross stitches. Twelve blocks of four cross stitches each fashion the diagonal that is completely embroidered in dark navy. The missing letters in this alphabet are J, U, X, Y and Z, making V the final letter, which is also stitched in a noteworthy manner. It is completely stitched in rose, with double rows of cross-stitch on either side – four rows all told. The width of the V across the top from the outer cross stitch on either side is 64 fabric threads, which narrows to 26 threads as the four rows of cross stitch shape a flat bottom, rather than a pointed one. Following the V, this band is divided into two bands, with the date “1758” and the letters I and b in lower case on the top half of the band; the initials I H and K I are on the bottom. Again, there is a mix of rose and dark navy wools being used. Finally, there are various discrepancies in the spacing of letters throughout this entire alphabet. Each row of this alphabet is separated by a single row of cross stitch over 2 threads, the first two in dark navy and the last, as well as the line between the initials, in rose. The lines are broken in several places at random, where stitches are missing.

The sixth alphabet that is somewhat crowded, fills the first of the last three bands, all of which are narrow. The height of each letter, like those at the top of the sampler, is seven cross stitches or 14 fabric threads high. However not all are uppercase: d, f, g, r and t appear to be lower case, although the letters are very crowded and there is considerable wear.

Missing letters in this alphabet are J, V, Y and Z. While both the rose and two shades of navy are used, rose is the predominant colour.

The second-last band is, to some extent, the most surprising. It features numbers one to 15, but from 10 on, the letter J is used rather than the number one – J0, JJ, J2, etc. (and yet the J is missed in the alphabets!). Stitched in dark navy and rose, the numbers and the Js are seven cross stitches or 14 fabric threads high. Unfortunately, the number one at the very beginning is so badly worn, it is impossible to know whether it would have been a J or really was a one.

The last band—not underlined—begins with an illegible letter due to wear, (possibly an I) and then an upper case H and I, followed by a lower case h, and then M, H, both in upper case, all of which total about a half a band in length. The letters are seven cross stitches or 14 fabric threads high, stitched in rose and navy. Like much of the above, spaces between these elements vary.

**History:** This intriguing 18<sup>th</sup> Century sampler almost defies its unknown origin as one considers the possibility of a young girl learning her stitches by copying perhaps her grandmother’s sampler or a long time cherished needlework book. Unfortunately only the sampler survives; the history has been lost. It is one of the many objects in Leonida Leatherdale’s estate that was donated to the EAC Heritage Collection.

While this long, narrow sampler with its rows of alphabets looks like a 17<sup>th</sup> Century sampler, the embroiderer thankfully did date her work so that we know it was embroidered in 1758. Similarly, the selvage edges at the top and bottom signify that this even weave linen has been fashioned on a wider 18<sup>th</sup> Century loom. Another tell-tale sign with respect to origin is the lack of motifs. The latter may simply indicate that this sampler indeed has been copied from earlier work, whether from another piece of embroidery or pattern book. On the other hand, the lack of motifs could suggest this piece was created in Europe, as numerous embroiderers in America by this time had rejected the band design for more creative pictorial ideas. Trees, birds and animals were decorating the lower half of samplers, which were beginning to display colourful borders.

Perhaps one of the most puzzling aspects of this sampler is the use of the letter J. It does not appear in the alphabets, which is often the case in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, but in this case, the J has replaced the number one. Accordingly, we can say J was known to the 1758 stitcher or those from whom she copied. But why was it used as a number? Interestingly enough, while such examples may be sparse in needlework, there is evidence in

some genealogy circles that the letter J was used on occasion instead of the number one with regard to dates. Another point to ponder is that sets of numbers rarely extend beyond nine or ten on samplers. In this example the numbers are from one to 15.

With respect to the sampler itself, it appears to be more as a learning piece than it is a masterpiece to be admired on the wall. There is a fair amount of work and much of it is done well, but there are definite mistakes. Even with mistakes, the embroiderer has maintained uniformity within the size of the elements—both letters and numbers—but the spaces between might be questioned. Were these errors in the original piece or needlework book that was perhaps copied, or are they the work of the young 18<sup>th</sup> Century stitcher just learning to embroider in less than adequate light? Did she enjoy her task or was it an endurance test?

Several initials ornamenting the bottom of the sampler suggest that this might well be the work of a young embroiderer. Novice stitchers frequently honoured their parents, siblings or teachers by adding their initials to the embroidery. If, in fact, this sampler was fashioned by a young embroiderer copying her ancestor's work or following a pattern book handed down from one generation to another, then in all probability this sampler represents and preserves a particular stitching tradition, even though the embroiderer and her family are not known.

**Materials:** Ecrú evenweave linen, 35 threads to the inch, rose, dark and slate navy wools.